

Comics: Meet the Artist Brian Crane Cartoonist, "Pickles"

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Join Washington Post Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin online two Fridays each month to discuss the comics pages. From artists to writers to editors, Tobin is joined by a different guest for each show. This week, Tobin will be joined by "Pickles" cartoonist Brian Crane.

Join Tobin and Crane online on Friday, Dec. 3 at 1 p.m. ET to discuss "Pickles" and the art of cartooning.

Submit questions either before or during the discussion.

Editor's Note: washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans, to another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today our guest is Brian Crane, creator of "Pickles." Brian is joining us today from his studio in Reno, Nevada. Welcome, Brian, and thanks for joining us Live Online.

Brian Crane: Hi, Suzanne. It's great to be here with you. It's a beautiful clear, cold day here in Reno.

Herndon, VA: Are you old? You seem to have good insights into the travails of the elderly.

Brian Crane: Let's say I'm on the cusp of old age. I was forty years old when I began doing the strip, and now I see myself gradually turning into Earl. I guess it's a case of life imitating art. If I'd known this was going to happen I would've done a strip about a young

handsome guy instead. I don't know if I have any special insight into the travails of the elderly. I do love senior citizens, though. I enjoy their company and hope to become one myself someday.

Silver Spring: Hi, Mr. Crane. Can you tell me a bit about your work habits? Do you listen to music...talk radio...or TV while you work? What's a typical day like for you?

Brian Crane: It kind of depends which kind of work I'm doing. If I'm trying to think of ideas or writing I usually like silence, so I turn off the tv or radio. Once I start drawing then I can turn the music back on. I don't know if I really have a typical day. The nice thing about doing what I do for a living is that I can make my own schedule, so I try not to get into a rut. Generally I do my writing in the morning and my drawing in the afternoon.

Morgantown, W.Va.: Do you have a new Pickles collection coming out in book form? I thinking Christmas present for my mom, who is a big fan of Opal.

Brian Crane: I was hoping someone would ask that. It gives me an opportunity to shamelessly promote my new book, Still Pickled After All These Years. It was released in April by Andrew McMeel. I might give a copy to my mom too.

Harrisburg, Pa.: Are any of your characters based on actual family members or people you've known, or perhaps composites of different people, or is each character not based upon anyone in particular?

Brian Crane:

I didn't realize it when I was creating my main characters, Earl and Opal, but as I saw them on the comics page I gradually realized that they were amazingly similar to my wife's parents. I've never told them this because I'm not sure how they'd take it, so let's keep it a secret, okay? The dog, Roscoe, was actually based on a dog I had when I created the strip. He's now gone on to Doggie Heaven, but it's nice to see him living on in the comics.

Silver Spring: What do you think of your colleague Berke Breathed's return to the comics pages? Have you met him? What's he like?

Brian Crane: I was happy to see Berke return to the comic pages. I have always admired his work and took some pride in the fact that we were both with the same syndicate, the Washington Post Writers Group. I had never actually met him until a few weeks ago at a Fine Toon Fellowship in Santa Barbara. He took us out on his boat to go whale watching. We didn't see any whales, but we had a nice time. He seems like a very nice guy and is as funny in person as he is in his strip.

Capitol Hill: Are Opal and Earl Republicans or Democrats? And do they live in a blue or a red state?

Brian Crane: I try to avoid politics in my strip, as a rule. The minute you identify yourself as a Republican or a Democrat you tick off half your readers. I guess I'm a spineless wimp, but I prefer to leave that stuff to the political cartoonists.

Lake Anna: Since you write so much about retired people, what sort of retirement do you look forward to for yourself?

Brian Crane: I don't know that I'll ever retire from the strip unless I have to. My goal is to just keep doing it until I drop dead at my drawing board. Charles Schulz has always been an inspiration to me. I doubt that I'll be able to do my strip as long as he did Peanuts because I got started later in life, but I'm going to give it a shot.

Bethesda, Md.: Have you ever considered incorporating an "issue" into your strip? So many cartoonists seem to champion a cause...I'm thinking of Patrick McDonnell and animal adoption, for example. Thanks for taking my question.

Brian Crane: Pickles is not a real issue-oriented strip, but I think I have addressed certain topics that were important to me over the

years. A while back I did a series about deaf dogs (my own dog is completely deaf) and I heard from several organizations who said they appreciated my treatment of that subject. There have been a few others like that as well. And, of course, I have dealt extensively with the issue of male pattern baldness.

Suzanne Tobin: Brian, when you were a guest on this chat in 2001, you said you had seven children but only one grandchild who lived in North Carolina and that some of what goes on in the strip was wishful thinking, because you'd love to have your child and grandchild live next door. Have you had any more grandkids since then? Had any success getting the grandkid's parents to move closer?

Brian Crane: Yes, I'm happy to report I am now the proud grandfather of three and a half grandchildren. One of them even lives nearby and he appeared briefly in the strip as a baby that Opal was babysitting for a while. As he gets a little older I think he will provide some fodder for Nelson (the grandson in my strip.)

Washington, D.C.: Just wanted to say thanks for the laughs. My parents have a very-yellowed clipping of the strip with the punchline, "What would God want with a dead cat?" hung on their refrigerator, and it makes me--and them--crack up every time I visit.

Brian Crane: That's great. I can't think of a better tribute to a comic strip than to have a place of honor on someone's fridge. To me that's the equivalent of being in the Louvre.

Alexandria, Va.: Thanks for taking my question. I really enjoy your strip and love the intergenerational interaction. Do you think that's something that is going the way of the dinosaurs in our increasingly mobile society? So many kids grow up with their grandparents hundreds of miles away. Did you live near your grandparents when you grew up?

Brian Crane: Yes, I think that is an unfortunate fact. My grandparents didn't live very close to me when I was growing up and the visits were always too short and too far between. I mean, who wouldn't want to be spoiled by a couple of adoring elders a little more? And it's not just

the spoiling. I enjoyed listening to them talk about when they were young. My grandpas, both of them, were great kidders, so that was fun, too. I think maybe that yearning for more contact with my own grandparents is what led me to do a strip about grandparents.

Fairfax Station, Va.: What tools do you use to make your drawings?

Brian Crane: I know a lot of cartoonists use computer programs and such these days, but I'm not big on technology so I draw with waterproof india ink and an old croquille pen on Bristol paper. That means my fingers are perpetually ink-stained, but that's an occupational hazard I'm willing to put up with.

Washington DC: No question, just wanted to say thanks for all the laughs! Earl cracks me up!

Brian Crane: Thanks. I think Earl is the character I most identify with and frequently I get inspiration for him through my own fumbling ways. I'm not quite as funny as he is, though.

Crystal City Va.: Hello Mr. Crane.

I have to say, I just love Pickles! When I visit my Dad, who's 88, we get into the comics, and he always brings up Pickles. I have to say every time I read it I laugh. Thank you so much. Where did the idea come from, your folks?

Brian Crane: Thanks. I appreciate that. I guess when I was looking for an idea for a comic strip I noticed there didn't seem to be any about old people, and it seemed like a natural. As a demographic group, they are ignored in a lot of ways, and I feel good about any attention can direct their way.

Fairfax Station, Va.:

Thanks for any questions you can answer for me. (This is for my English assignment.)

How long have you been a cartoonist?
How did you start?
Can one make a living off of this career, or do they need another parttime job?
Do you work full-time or part-time?
How long does it take you to make a comic/cartoon?
What tools do you use to make your drawings?
What skills are most important to a cartoonist?
How long have you been a cartoonist? When did you first start cartooning professionally?
What is the easiest way to come up with ideas for a cartoon?
What are the main things you draw?
How much money do you make for each product?
In your opinion, do you need any special education to be a cartoonist?
Did you get any special drawing education?
In your opinion, what is the hardest part about being a cartoonist?
Do you work for a company or are you self-employed? If you work for a company, are there any other famous cartoonists who work for the same company? If you are self-employed, is it hard to stay on track and not get distracted while working by yourself? How do you stay focused?
Brian Crane: Your question would take a little too long to answer here, but if you'll send me an email at picklescomic@sbcglobal.net I will be glad to respond.

Annandale VA: My 11 yr old and I both enjoy the strip immensely. And he relates very well -- before it was in Pickles he asked me "what colour did your hair use to be?"

What's your favourite strip (past or present)?

Brian Crane: Wow, that's like asking me which of my seven children I like best. I'm usually pretty critical of my own work, so usually when I look at them I cringe, and all I can see are the flaws. But one that I kind of liked involved Earl absent-mindedly walking his dog in park. After a while he looks down and realizes he is holding an empty leash. He can't remember if he found a leash or lost a dog. I guess I like that one because it came from personal experience.

Buckhead, Ga.: Hi Brian. Could you provide some insight into how you were able to break into the nearly-impossible- to-break-into field of

cartooning? Thanks!

Brian Crane: Well, in my case the secret was being married to someone who believed in my work more than I did. After Pickles was rejected by the first three syndicates I submitted it to, I gave up on the idea. My wife, Diana, eventually talked me into submitting it one more time. I did so, against my better judgement, and that was when I got my break with the Washington Post Writers Group.

More Sylvia, please!: He's probably too shy to write in and say this himself, but I know that Gene Weingarten thinks that Sylvia is hot, hot, hot, and would love to see more of her in future strips.

Brian Crane: I don't know Mr. Weingarten well, but I doubt if shyness is one of his faults. Actually, Sylvia, as well as her husband Dan, are the hardest of my characters for me to write for. Earl and Opal and the rest seem to come pretty naturally to me, but I struggle with Sylvia and Dan. That's why they end up just being straight men to set up jokes for the others. If they were smart they would quit the strip and try to get better roles somewhere else.

Slower Lower, Del.: There was a strip in the Sunday comics 'way back when you were barely past 40, that sort of encapsulates my married life, and I'd love to find it in print somewhere (didn't realize at the time how often I'd use it for reference). Is there any way to go about finding a copy of it?

Brian Crane: I have complete archives of the strip going back to the beginning. If you can email me as much about it as you can remember I'll try to find it and send you a copy. My email address is printed each day in my strip. You may need a magnifying glass to see it, though.

Washington, D.C.: Which cartoonist was most influential to you?
What is the hardest part about being a cartoonist?
How do you stay focused and not get distracted while working in a solitary occupation?

Brian Crane: When I was a kid I loved Al Capp's Li'l Abner and Walt Kelly's Pogo. I used to try to draw like they did, but was never able to. Charles Schulz has to be way up there as well, not just for his creativity, but for the kind of man he was. There are lots of contemporary cartoonists whose work I admire now but I won't try to name them all.

Comics Reader: What do you think about the shrinking size of the comics in newspapers? The Post isn't too bad, but I was out of town recently and couldn't believe how tiny some papers run the comics.

Brian Crane: I'm not crazy about the shrinking of the comics, of course. I think they deserve better. I think it's especially difficult for many of my readers who happen to be senior citizens and don't do well with small print. I try to make the lettering in my strip as large as possible for that reason.

Arlington, Va.: "One of these days you're literally going to bore someone to death" has to be one of the greatest comics punchlines ever. Love the strip, keep up the good work.

Brian Crane: Thanks. I hope I haven't bored anyone to death today on this chat. It's been great being here. Thanks, Suzanne!